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SUBJECT: VIOLENCE SUBSIDES IN ORISSA BUT TENSIONS ABOUT RESERVATIONS
REMAIN

REF: KOLKATA 385, KOLKATA 388

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: On January 2, Federal Home Minister Shivraj Patil visited Orissa's riot-hit Kandhamal district and assured the victims of last week's violence of government protection and security. Patil also visited a Baptist church and some houses that were torched during the riots. On December 31, the Orissa Government announced that all the families whose houses had been burnt down or damaged during the riots would be given houses under the national "Indira Awas Yojana" housing scheme. Orissa Home Secretary T. K. Mishra told Post that the security situation was under control and that the Orissa government has deployed 1500 state policemen to the area while the federal government authorized the use of twenty platoons (about 600) of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). Reports from Christian community organizations put the death toll at ten people killed, but Mishra put the number of total dead at three. Although the situation has stabilized, the question of reservations in the workplace for Christian Dalits makes religion and religious conversion in Orissa a continuing issue. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On January 2, Federal Home Minister Shivraj Patil visited Orissa's riot-hit Kandhamal district and assured the victims of government protection and security. The violence between Hindus and Christian last week left at least three people dead and numerous others injured and displaced. The Orissa government has so far arrested eighty persons for their alleged involvement in the violence and rioting. Home Minister Patil visited a rehabilitation camp set up in Barakhama village where over 700 people had taken shelter after their houses were burned down by rioters. Barakhama, about 200 kilometers south of Phulbani, was the worst hit village in the predominantly tribal Kandhamal district. Kandhamal has a total population of 600,000, with a 62 percent tribal population and a close to 30 percent Christian population, and is considered one of the most communally sensitive regions in Orissa.

¶3. (SBU) Patil also visited a Baptist church and some houses that were torched during the riots. Earlier, Patil met with Orissa Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik and Governor M.C. Bhandare who briefed him on the steps being taken to provide relief and rehabilitation for riot victims. On December 31 the Orissa Government announced that all the families whose houses had been burnt down or damaged would be given houses under the "Indira Awas Yojana" (Indira Housing Scheme), used primarily to help construct homes for members of Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes, freed bonded laborers, and non-Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe rural poor who live below the poverty line. The scheme

was launched in 1985-86 during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister. The government also said Rs. 100,000 (USD 2500) each would be paid to the next of kin of the three victims whose bodies were found. In case of the families whose houses had been partially damaged, the government would pay compensation of Rs 10,000 (USD 250) each.

¶4. (SBU) Orissa government's Home Secretary T.K. Mishra told Post that the situation in the state is now under control with 1500 state policemen deployed in the affected area and the federal government providing twenty platoons (about 600 personnel) from the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). Mishra added that authorities had so far found three dead in connection with the riots, including one Hindu and one Christian. Mishra said that the third body had not been identified so far, and suggested that the victim may have belonged to a Maoist cadre. (Note: there had been some news reports that Maoists had played a role in instigating the violence, but these were not substantiated. End note.) Mishra said that about 500 houses and an unspecified number of churches had been destroyed.

¶5. (SBU) Ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders say that only three to four persons were killed in the district and dozens injured in the sectarian clashes, while Christian community leaders claim that at least ten persons were killed in the attacks. President of the All India Christian Council (Orissa Chapter) Reverend P.R. Parichha informed Post that, although the tension simmers, the situation has eased as the government is now more responsive to the immediate concerns about law and order. Parichha added that his sources believe that at least ten persons were killed but the state government believes that only three were killed because only three bodies have been found.

¶6. (SBU) Chairman of the State Civil Supplies Corporation in Orissa government and former general secretary of the BJP Sudipto Ray had a different take on Home Minister Patil's visit, claiming that Patil arrived to "pacify the Christians" and to ensure that Congress' Christian vote-bank was intact. Ray

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expected no more help from the federal government citing that law and order is a state subject. Ray added that the religious tensions will continue to simmer because the basic issue of reservations (Reftels) for tribals and the schedule castes has yet to be solved by the GOI. He added that those tribals who have converted to Christianity are not eligible for reservations in government jobs as the federal government does not allow reservation on the basis of religion.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: With the deployment of large numbers of security personnel, the situation in Orissa has calmed significantly. As mentioned in reftels, however, a tense atmosphere remains due to the reservations issue. Some in the Christian community in Orissa who have been demanding reservations in government jobs believe that this could be their best chance to convince the GOI that tribal Dalit Christians need reservations in government jobs.

MILLER